

PERSIAN GULF AREA

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SAUDIS PROPOSE LINK-UP WITH OTHER GULF STATES

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[Report by Patrick Seale]

[Text] At-Ta'if, Saudi Arabia--In a major development which could change the political map of Arabia, the Saudi Kingdom and five lesser neighbours are considering joining together in a confederation of Gulf states, according to senior Arab delegates at last week's Islamic summit.

Under cover of the summit, leaders from Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman and Saudi Arabia held an unpublicised meeting here to discuss their plans. Their foreign ministers are to meet in Riyadh on 4 February to study constitutional proposals which have already been circulated in great secret.

These proposals are understood to go considerably beyond the shared security concerns which first drew these countries together in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the Gulf war.

What is under discussion is nothing less than a sort of political marriage on the model of the Malaysian Federation, where the federal head of state is elected in rotation for a five-year term from among the members.

If it comes off, such a Gulf confederation, which Saudi Arabia would be bound to dominate, would greatly boost Saudi power and prestige and be a major blow to the ambitions of Iraq in the Gulf.

Iraq has been informed of the plan and, in a diplomatic trade-off, is believed to have reluctantly acquiesced in it in exchange for Saudi and Gulf backing for its war against Iran.

This war is a prime reason prompting the Gulf states to move closer together. They fear that, even if a ceasefire is arranged soon, the antagonisms aroused between Arab and Persian, and between Sunni and Shia, could take a generation to appease with a constant threat of renewed flare-up. Their greatest desire is not to be sucked in--a desire ardently shared by their Western friends and oil clients.

But if the Iraq-Iran war is the spur to the Gulf get-together, it has also provided Saudi Arabia with the opportunity to make a bid for regional leadership. In the private words of a senior Saudi prince: 'The war has won us 10 years.'

By this he meant that Iraq and Iran, the kingdom's two principal rivals, had each suffered such a setback as to give the kingdom its chance.

Of all the complex inter-Arab relations, the Saudi-Iraqi one is now among the most interesting and ambiguous. Saudi Arabia needed—and still needs—the muscle of Iraq to roll back the subversive tide of Shia revolution emanating from Ayatollah Khomeyni in Iran. In other words, Iraq is a necessary buffer between Saudi Arabia, with its small population, and Iran's much larger 36 million whose revanchiste nationalism has now been so alarmingly aroused.

But, although the Saudis have supported Iraq's war effort, the two countries are really adversary partners. Ideologically and geopolitically they are at odds, and, beneath the surface cordiality of relations between Crown Prince Fahd and President Saddam runs a current of caution and competition.

Last week's summit showed that, for the moment at any rate, Saudi Arabia can have its cake and eat it. Iraq is doing the dirty work in the muddy plains of Khuzestan, while Saudi Arabia reaps the political glory of hosting the greatest gathering of Islamic leaders the modern world has ever seen.

Undoubtedly, the at-Ta'if summit has done the Saudi image nothing but good. Brother Arabs were highly impressed with the Western efficiency of the arrangements, the meticulous staff work, the fastidious finish of the buildings and highways, the smart, alert bearing of the Saudi security forces. But there was no loss of Bedouin hospitality or Islamic piety. It was as if the kingdom had managed that most difficult of exercises--squaring the circle between the best of East and West.

The picture the Saudis were trying, not unsuccessfully, to put over was of a strong, stable regime which had fully recovered from the security hiccup of November 1979 when insurgents stormed the Great Mosque in Mecca.

In hard political terms, the significant aspect of this summit, assembling a quarter of the world's nations, was that it signalled Saudi determination to play a more assertive role in the world. The instrument for this new role is the Islamic Conference Organization, founded in 1969 but now for the first time under Saudi chairmanship.

The aim of Saudi diplomacy is to demonstrate that this Muslim forum can be the most effective of all Third World bodies--better able to shape events than the now dormant Arab League, the gravely split non-alignment movement, or the powerless Organisation for African Unity. Saddam of Iraq, who is looking forward to hosting the non-aligned conference in Baghdad next year, finds himself upstaged.

United in Islam and exceedingly well funded, the Islamic Conference is being pushed by the Saudis as the place where Third World disputes can best be resolved; where Khomeyni's Shia mischief can best be countered; where the cause of an independent Palestine can best be promoted, and where the encroaching superpowers can best be kept at arm's length.

With these ambitions and backed by Gulf money, conference must be judged an important new player in international affairs.

Can Saudi Arabia pull it off? It is essentially a cheque-book state, it has an anachronistic social system, remains heavily dependent on foreigners, and is unused to projecting its power abroad.

Now it has manoeuvred itself to the centre of two new power groupings—the proposed Gulf confederation and the Islamic Conference Organization, whose multiple agencies range from high finance to sport, from Islamic education to the promotion of trade, and half a dozen other activities besides.

Saudi skills and nerves are going to be stretched in the years ahead.

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Saudi Arabia and 5 smaller neighbors (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Oman) are considering joining together in a confederation of Persian Gulf States. Central Intelligence Agency, 25 Feb. 1981.